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ABSTRACT

Drury College (Missouri) has developed a commercial French course that is practical, situation-oriented, and provides instruction in correspondence and translation. The course is considered part of the cultural segment of the French program. It enrolls majors in business, French, and a variety of other disciplines, and emphasizes contextual listening comprehension and speaking, cultural readings and discussions, translation, and formal correspondence. Instructional activities include readings, short films, the writing of resumes for articles in current French newsmagazines, Monopoly played in French, idiomatic translation exercises, and letter-writing. Student evaluation is based on class participation, homework, three tests, and a final project consisting of a commercial and a series of letters synthesizing the cultural material covered with technical language skills. The course attracts and retains advanced language students and provides practical language skills in a liberal arts context. A six-page bibliography is included. (MSE)

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COMMERCIAL FRENCH IN A LIBERAL ARTS SETTING

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Commercial French in a Liberal Arts Setting

-Jayne ABRATE

The size and liberal arts philosophy of a small university like Drury College have made it an ideal place to develop and experiment with a commercial French course. With approximately 20 French majors and minors out of a student body of 1000 and a strong business program, we have been able to attract a sufficient number of capable, motivated students to support a yearly commercial French course. Although slightly more than half of those enrolled in the class have a combined business-French major, the others come from a wide variety of disciplines. Adapting such a course to meet such diverse needs often requires broadening the scope of the material to reach students other than those interested purely in business use of the language. Each semester advanced French students at Drury College may choose between a language or culture course and a literature course. Commercial French, considered a cultural component, introduces students to basic structures, services, and customs of French society as related to commerce. Course development and instruction focus on three priorities: first of all, that the course be practical in nature, imparting useful information to those who might one day use their linguistic ability to represent a company or simply as tourists; secondly, that it be situation oriented, providing knowledge and skills appropriate to everyday situations for the traveler or business person; and, finally, that it include

instruction in correspondence and translation. The following furnishes a brief overview of the basic elements of this course and how they might be adapted to other institutional settings and pedagogical goals.

For most of our students, Commercial French constitutes their first exposure to upper-division French work. Therefore, the level of instruction remains rather rudimentary, for students must not only make the transition from a structured intermediate program to more independent work but must also absorb the peculiarities of French business language and structure. The necessary assimilation of vocabulary and objective concepts aids this transition, allowing more abstract analysis and applications in the second half of the semester. The bulk of the syllabus[1] provides for reading and discussion of general articles on social and governmental organization (banks, legislature, communication services, the legal system), supplemented by conversation and writing activities. At the advanced level, with similar content, students delve more deeply into business transactions, policies, and law. The textbooks, Français commercial: Théorie et correspondance by Denise Guback for the first course and Commercial French by Patricia W. Cummins at the advanced level, have proved quite successful.[2] Weekly lesson plans cover the following activities: contextual listening comprehension and speaking, cul-

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[1]See Appendix 1 for a sample syllabus.

[2]See attached bibliography for other texts. Those marked with an asterisk would be particularly appropriate in a commercial French course such as the one discussed here.

tural readings and discussion, translation, and formal correspondence.

While listening comprehension and speaking practice are integral parts of any course conducted in the target language, special attention is given here to conversational skills that might be useful in specific face-to-face situations or on the telephone--checking into a hotel, making airline reservations, renting a car, or making an appointment with a company. An effective technique for developing such skills is the dialogue. It provides a context for learning vocabulary and cultural etiquette and appears frequently in business French texts, culture texts, or can be readily created by an instructor. Scripts containing useful terms and idiomatic expressions are distributed or placed on reserve in the library or pre-recorded conversations are placed in the language laboratory where the students listen without the printed text as an aural comprehension exercise.[3] Following in-class or lab practice, class members, grouped in pairs, create and perform or record their own versions based on a similar task. If a native speaker-lab assistant is available, an assignment might include recording an impromptu "telephone" conversation in the language laboratory. In such a way, the difficulties inherent in telephone conversations can be simulated by dealing with a native speaker, eliminating visual contact, and using advantag-

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[3]Such dialogues are contained in the series Le Français des hommes d'affaires, Le Français de la banque, Le Français du secrétartiat commercial, Le Français de l'hôtelerie et du tourisme, and Le Français des relations internationales, the Cummins' text presents the material in dialogue form.

eously the mechanical distortion of the sound equipment. This sort of activity adapts to any level of difficulty and can include vocabulary ranging from food terms used to order in a restaurant to technical business terms such as invoice, shipment, and freight costs used to place an order. In addition, each class begins with a dictée taken from that day's reading or using important terminology. Listening and speaking practice occupy approximately one quarter of class time.

The majority of one bi-weekly class period is devoted to reading and discussion of the material contained in each chapter, the focus of which is primarily cultural. We consider, by comparison to America, how the average Frenchman functions in a consumer society. Through readings and the observations of those who have visited France, commonplace phenomena--types of stores: grandes surfaces, supermarchés, grands magasins or expressions: service compris, société anonyme, commander, la TVA--can reveal obvious differences between the two societies. Thus, discussion centers on what such concepts signify and what counterparts they have in our culture or why none exists. Depending on the expertise of business students in the class, we are sometimes forced to revert to English in explaining, for example, technical terms and various types of organizational structures--société à responsabilité limitée, société civile, bilan--which either do not have American equivalents or with which the majority of students are unfamiliar even in English. In so far as possible, however, explanation and discussion are carried out in French. For college-level courses,

several excellent business French textbooks have now been published, but even in a high school class, articles can be simplified, edited, or created by the instructor to accomodate the ability of the learners.

In addition to textbook readings, students must prepare a weekly resume of an article in L'Express or L'Expansion. (Copies of the articles are also submitted.) Such an assignment allows each class member to pursue his or her own interests while keeping abreast of current events. The business majors tend to prefer L'Expansion and items related to the economy or international trade. Using L'Express, on the other hand, allows a pre-med major to focus on medical research, a theatre buff to learn about theatrical terminology from a play review, or a psychology student to chose a piece on the role of women in French society. The resumes are collected and graded for comprehension but not grammar, and the students are periodically required to give an oral resume of what they have read. When the content truly interests them, students are overwhelmingly willing to struggle through difficult texts. As the term progresses, students comment more and more regularly on how an article they have previously read relates directly to the material under study.

Short films and realia are utilized for nearly every class period, providing concrete examples of the situations and tools studied. Well-chosen films dealing with small businesses and typically French industries or videotapes of French commercials supplement and reinforce the organizational and publicity concepts

discussed in class.* Popular realia include un livret de famille, une carte d'identité, driver's license, checks, bank statements, phone and electric bills, stamps, and money. Forms and documents contain examples used in context of terminology presented in the textbook. Address formats and giving directions can be practiced with maps. Trip itineraries may be developed from train and airline schedules and hotel information. An exercise that may even serve as a major project incorporates practical considerations, culture and geography, and letter writing. Each student is given a Michelin guide for a different region of France and two city maps from that region. They are then instructed to plan a ten-day visit, from arrival in Paris with a maximum stay of two days, followed by a visit to at least two regional cities and departure from another European capital. A Paris map, Thomas Cook International Train Timetable, and restaurant guide for France are placed on reserve in the library. Students must account for every movement on the trip, using both train and bus transportation, choosing hotels and restaurants and sightseeing activities. Accompanying their final itinerary must be the appropriate letters--requesting hotel and/or car reservations and bus schedules from the tourist office, as well as a financial accounting of their expenses in francs.

Magazines, old French issues or even English ones, and excerpts from the French yellow pages provide countless examples

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*Many excellent films are available through FACSEA, 972 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10021.

of publicity and terminology.[8] Reports, documentation, brochures, and slides are available from French governmental agencies such as the RATP, SNCF, PTT, Banque de France, and syndicats d'initiative. If time and class size permit, a French version of Monopoly can be played, allowing conversation practice as well as use of technical terminology--hypothèque, impôts sur le revenu, loyer, terrain, rembourser, police d'assurance, emprunt, prêt. The possibilities for complementary activities are endless and serve to support the practical, situation-oriented focus of the course.

While the effectiveness of translation exercises in fostering communication may be debated, they should comprise an important element of a commercial foreign language course. For many working in a company with international ties, translation is often the task the employee with second langauge skills is called upon to perform. Therefore, some instruction in how to translate and the pitfalls to avoid serves a practical purpose. Once students have acquired a familiarity with basic business terms, translation from French to English for meaning is relatively simple. The difficulty lies in urging them to make the leap from literal translation, which often results in garbled English because of the French formules de politesse, to idiomatic translation. In most real-life situations, the gist of the original will suffice; a professional translator should be used for important technical documents such as a contract, for instance. Translating a piece

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[8]See Timothy M. Scanlan, "Looking Up French Language and Culture in the Paris pages jaunes," French Review, 59, 3 (Feb. 1986), pp. 355-62 for information on using the yellow pages.

of correspondence from English to French presents different obstacles. All too frequently, the English letter is unclear; the fledgling translator must ascertain, first of all, what the writer intends to say. A British business letter manual can be used effectively to make this point.* The British style is unnatural to most Americans who must struggle to decipher the meaning before translating. In fact, having classes translate the British English into American English and then into French forces them to clarify their English. Again, students often fail to make the shift from literal to accurate, idiomatic translation--eliminating s'il vous plaît or using vouloir/pouvoir in the conditional rather than the present tense, for example. Translation of reports, instructions, advertisements, and forms can provide a similar experience. For novices, structured exercises which carefully incorporate new vocabulary are appropriate, whereas as students progress in their grammatical skills, translation exercises of longer passages or even publicity which actually prohibits literal or word-for-word correspondence challenge their ability to comprehend, assimilate, and recapitulate what they have read.

The techniques, style, and formulas of correspondence also constitute an important aspect of any commercial French course. In fact, many textbooks include sections on business correspondence as a regular part of each chapter. Certainly, in business situations one should be able to compose as well as translate a reason-

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*French in the Office: Le Français au bureau, by M. M. Lentz, Hilde W. Watson, and S. McGuinn (London: Longmans, 1967).

ably correct letter, yet anyone with some linguistic ability in French can benefit from knowing how to write a formal letter. Handouts, including numerous examples of business correspondence with official letterheads, supply beginning terminology. Comparison and discussion revolve around formules de politesse, standard idiomatic expressions, and layout. Details such as address format, writing the date in letters and figures, and proper punctuation and capitalization are stressed. Students receive a list of errors deemed "fatal"--using s'il vous plaît, errors in date, address, salutation (using a proper name or cher, for instance), or formule de politesse and result in the assignment being returned ungraded for correction. Many students do not have any idea how to write a formal letter in English; therefore, instruction must begin with these superficial problems before proceeding to content. Students learn that in a serious situation it is preferable to write in English or to use a standard form letter taken from a manual than to write in bad French.[7] Since the style of a formal letter in French is so different from English, much practice is devoted to rephrasing, rewriting, composing from a list of given expressions, or transforming conversational sentences into an acceptable form. For example, Je voudrais savoir quels sont les tarifs pour louer une voiture, s'il vous plaît becomes Veuillez me faire savoir les tarifs pour la location d'une voiture. Unfortunately, even students who can write

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[7]Colette Verger Michael, "L'Enseignement du français commercial et ses problèmes," French Review, 55, 1 (Oct. 1981), pp. 18-19.

several pages in French making very few errors seem to forget grammar when faced with this new terminology. A common error surfaces with the use of the infinitive caused by *je vous prie* and *veuillez* and the causative *faire* construction. Those who have no problem with a sentence such as *Je voudrais recevoir des renseignements*, struggle with *Je vous prie de bien vouloir me faire parvenir des renseignements.* Early in the semester students are asked to write a letter requesting information from a French agency or business; those planning to do summer study in Québec write for information, a student planning a year in France writes for a visa application, others write a tourist bureau. This assignment reinforces the communicative aspect of correspondence and demonstrates to students that they are capable of writing a "real" French letter.

Evaluation is based on four components: class participation, homework, three tests, and a final project. Class participation considers preparation and active participation in the classroom, while homework involves translation, correspondence, lab work, and resumes. Testing involves the four primary areas: vocabulary (*dictée* or listening comprehension questions are common), short answer questions regarding concepts studied in the text, as well as translation of a business letter into English, and composition of a formal letter in French given a specific case. The final project, to be completed outside of class, is two-fold--the preparation of a commercial and a series of letters. To complete these assignments adequately, students must synthesize the cul-

tural material they have covered and combine this with technical language skills.

The commercial can be designed either for radio or television and have as many "actors" as desired; however, each class member must "direct" his or her own, choosing a product to market in France. If the commercial is for television, appropriate props and costumes are expected. In either case, background music and sound effects must be prepared. Some past examples include a radio commercial for a health club with appropriate background effects--swimming, a basketball game, weight machines--and a television commercial for a new coffee which is equally good hot or cold for those who spend long hours in a café. Commercials are graded on their quality and reflection of understanding of French culture and commercial structure. We do not have video recording facilities, but, ideally, the commercials could be recorded for class discussion and evaluation.

Early in the semester students are given a situation for which they must compose numerous letters. An example might be the following: You are planning to open a branch office in a French city other than Paris for a company that sells office supplies. You must write the local Chamber of Commerce, make a hotel reservation, cancel a previously made appointment, write to a supplier to inquire about delivery of an initial order, and respond a job applicant. Correspondence is graded on thoroughness, grammar, and style. Students at all levels can enjoy creating or adapting a French commercial, while the letter writing

assignments could also be simplified to making a reservation. The difficulty could be increased by describing the situation more explicity and letting the student decide what letters need to be written.

Commercial French provides a vehicle for attracting and retaining students in advanced language courses and making their language study relate in a practical way to their projected use of French in a career yet without sacrificing the broader liberal arts vision. Any of the techniques for presenting business-related culture, translation, and correspondence easily apply at levels from advanced high school through college, while the emphasis of the course can shift from business with a cultural focus to culture with a business focus according to the composition and desires of the diverse students in the class. Small group activities are highly effective, and much can be gained from the personal knowledge of individual students. The course truly becomes a collaborative effort when there are advanced business majors present who can shed light on the American system. The relevance of the material to real situations interests students; they can see clearly the utility of the skills they are learning and display their responsiveness with frequent and thought-provoking questions.

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Appendix 1
Syllabus
Commercial French: 344

I. The objective of this course is to introduce you to the fundamentals of French culture as it relates to business practices and of business letter writing through the study of terminology, formats, and translation.

II. You grade will be based on the following criteria:
25% Class participation
25% exams
25% written assignments
25% commercial and final essay

III. The textbook is: Français commercial: Théorie et correspondance (Guback)

IV. You are expected to attend class regularly and to participate actively in class discussions. You will be allowed 2 absences for whatever reason (excused or unexcused) after which your grade will suffer accordingly. All assignments are due in class on the day specified. Late assignments WILL NOT be accepted. Please keep this in mind when planning for major assignments. In addition, there will be No make-up exams.

V. The commercial and final essay constitute 1/4 of your final grade. The commercial should be about an American produce of your choosing that you would like to market in a French-speaking area. Using what you will have learned about French culture and business practices, you should create a one-minute commercial for either radio or TV (including dialogue, props, costumes, sound effects, background music, etc.). You may recruit other French students or members of the class to help you perform it, but each class member will be responsible for his/her own commercial. The final essay will be discussed later in the semester.

VI. Plagiarism in any form will result in an F for the course. I expect all work to be your own and any outside sources to be duly noted.

On reserve:

Le Français des hommes d'affaires (Dany, et al.)
Le Français de la banque (Dany, et al.)
Le Français de l'hôtellerie et du tourisme (Dany, et al.)
Le Français du secrétariat commercial (Dany, et al.)
Le Français des relations internationales (Dany, et al.)
Le Parfait secrétaire (Chaffurin)
Le Français commercial (Manuel-Vol. 1) (Mauger & Charon)

In the reference section of the library you will find French-English dictionaries, including Harrap's French-English Dictionary of Business

Terminology. The library also has the French periodicals L'Express and L'Expansion which you will be using throughout the semester.

Syllabus

TH Jan. 16 Introduction, Film-artisanat, Telephone etiquette
T Jan. 21 Ch 1-Notions générales sur le commerce (pp. 1-8)
TH Jan. 23 Résumé écrit d'un article, Traductions (pp. 8-9), Film-wine production
T Jan. 28 Ch 2-Organisation de l'entreprise et types de sociétés (pp. 10-18)
TH Jan. 30 Traductions (p. 18), Conversation-arrival at a hotel
T Feb. 4 Ch 3-Importance de la correspondance commerciale (pp. 19-28)
TH Feb. 6 Résumé oral d'un article, correspondance
T Feb. 11 Ch 4-La Publicité (pp. 29-33), Film-commercials
TH Feb. 13 Traductions & correspondance (pp. 34-37), Conversation-restaurants and dining
T Feb. 18 Examen
TH Feb. 20 Résumé écrit d'un article, Film-tourism, Dialogue
T Feb. 25 Ch 5-Les Services postaux (pp. 38-48)
TH Feb. 27 Traductions & correspondance (pp. 48-52)
T Mar. 4 Ch 6-Les Opérations bancaires (pp. 53-61), Conversation-banking operations and changing money
TH Mar. 6 Traductions & correspondance (pp. 61-64), résumé oral d'un article
T Mar. 11 Ch 7-Les Intermédiaires des commerçants (pp. 65-70)
TH Mar. 13 Ch 8-Les Transports (pp. 73-85)
T Mar. 18 Traductions et correspondance (pp. 85-88), Film-trains
TH Mar. 20 Examen

V A C A N C E S

T Apr. 1 Ch 9-Import-export, douanes, taxes, entreposage, magasins généraux (pp. 89-98)
TH Apr. 3 Traductions & correspondance (pp. 98-100), Conversation-telephone reservations
T Apr. 8 Ch 10-Services téléphoniques et télégraphiques, téléx, notes intérieures, rapports, comptes rendus et procès-verbaux (pp. 101-115)
TH Apr. 10 Résumé écrit d'un article et exercice pratique (p. 115)
T Apr. 15 Ch 11-Les Effets de commerce (pp. 117-127)
TH Apr. 17 Exercices (pp. 127-130), Film-small business
T Apr. 22 Ch 12-La Facturation et l'expédition (pp. 131-138)
TH Apr. 24 Exercices pratiques (pp. 139-142), résumé oral d'un article, Conversation-placing an order
T Apr. 29 Ch 14-La Comptabilité (pp. 159-171)
TH May 1 Examen
T May 6 Publicité et devoir final